

- * Paris Williams
- * Third World Women's Alliance
- * 16 January 1998

K: My first question was: how long did you participate in the Third World Women's Alliance?

Paris Williams: You know, it's been about twenty five years, 'cause we're talking about maybe the early '70s, and I would say my participation went on for some months, maybe as long as a year, but I can't really recall exactly.

K: Do you remember about when you joined? Were there any major political events that happened that you can recall?

Paris Williams: Well, actually, no. What it was was---I was already pretty politically active, primarily through the Committee to Defend Angela Davis and other political prisoners. And this woman came into town from New York---her name is Cheryl. She still lives here in Oakland. I think she works for the Port. Anyway, she moved out here for whatever reasons, but part of her mission was to organize a branch of the Third World Women's Alliance. And that's when I started first participating in terms of going to meetings and talking to other people about it and---'cause I was already moving in a group of people who were politically active in a variety of areas---'cause I was a student at the local community college at the time.

K: Which community college?

Paris Williams: Merritt College, it was called at the time.

K: Is it called something different now?

Paris Williams: Well, it moved. The location moved. Merritt College moved to a new location and then the location where we were---the name changed to Grove Street College and now it's being turned into a senior center and nonprofit consortium. The building has gone through a number of incarnations.

K: So were you involved directly through Cheryl or did you know someone else?

Paris Williams: No, Cheryl was the major contact. The other person that Cheryl was associated with a lot, who was also in the Third World Women's Alliance, was a woman named Melanie Turvalon [Tervalon?] who's now a pediatrician. I don't know if Turvalon is still her last name.

K: Do you remember what year it was that you were involved?

Paris Williams: I would say '71, '72, somewhere in there.

K: Okay, and so you---your previous activism was---you were with the Committee to Defend Angela Davis and other political prisoners. Were you involved with any other organizations?

Paris Williams: Communist Party. Young Communists League.

K: Any civil rights or women's organizations?

Paris Williams: Not at that time. My primary work was really political prisoners and the Young Communists League.

K: What role did you play in Third World Women's Alliance?

Paris Williams: Well, essentially, organizer. I mean, in that sort of very early time 'cause as I said Cheryl came out here. She didn't really know anybody, you know, maybe a few people. And there were loads of us around school who were active. So I pulled a lot of those people into the organization and then it kind of

grew bigger out of---from there. But once it started to grow, there was this tension that developed. If I recall rightly the tension really was around sexual preference issues. That there were a lot of people who had sort of been a part of Third World Women's Alliance initially who were gay women. And there was kind of a backlash against that and pretty much they all left.

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K: Which? The lesbians all left or the---

Paris Williams: Yeah. And that included me. And then later---I'm not sure exactly how much later---I sort of recycled back into the organization or at least I tried to do that. Because really the whole issue of sexuality wasn't an issue I really spent that much time thinking about. I was really much more focused on African American issues, issues of political prisoners, but African American issues of poverty, injustice, all that kind of stuff. So I went back into the Third World Women's Alliance or I attempted to do so. And I remember doing some work around Southern African with them because at that time there was still stuff going on, like, in Guinea Bissau, Angola, you know, and, of course, South Africa. And the Third World Women's Alliance was involved in that work kind of intensely. And I remember working with a committee for a period of time, you know, writing brochures and information sheets.

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K: A committee within the Third World Women's Alliance?

Paris Williams: Yeah, yeah. And doing a lot of stuff like that.

K: Do you---just to back up a little---do you recall how many members there were at any given time?

Paris Williams: I have no idea. I mean, maybe at the beginning there were maybe fifteen, twenty women. And then later, by the time I kind of recycled back there were---I don't know. I have really no idea. And actually I didn't know that many of the women at that point.

K: Did it seem like there were fewer or more when you recycled back in?

Paris Williams: Probably more.

K: So, that would be one event then that stands out for you. Sort of the backlash that happened against lesbians.

Paris Williams: Yeah, initially that was part of it. It was interesting. I mean, probably one of the reasons why I remember it so well is 'cause I had been---you know, I was born and raised in this community and had been involved, you know, over my life in a lot of different sort of community-based activities. And they were always sort of, like, characteristically. I want to say it was very seldom there was any kind of polarization like gay or straight. Or black or white. Or Latin or Asian. And so I was really very much accustomed to moving amongst all sorts of without really giving a whole lot of thought to, "Oh, well, you're a this and I'm a that." I just---in a way that's very typical of the west coast.

K: So do you think that that tension had its roots in---I'm trying to get at what might have caused it. If it was---

Paris Williams:---people coming out of the east.

K: Okay.

Paris Williams: That was part of it. That kind of, sort of like, polarization. I think. That's just an opinion. And probably it's informed by more recent events, I mean, in my life. I've done a lot of research on local history, for example. And if you look in the east, like, back in the day when they was the NAACP and then the UNIA and all that. In the east there was polarization where you were either somebody who followed Garvey or somebody who followed DuBois. You know what I'm saying? If you look at the membership lists in Oakland, which also had very strong, very active branches of both organizations, you basically find

the same names on both lists. It was like, "Well, whatever's gonna help. Fine. Let's do it." And so it's---I think there is definitely a different attitude in a regional sense.

K: And so would you then, of course, assume that that was more productive if people—I don't know. Do you think that was more productive if people sort of set aside those differences that seemed to come out.

Paris Williams: I think so. And also it just made for a happier environment, in general. What's everybody pissed off about? [laughter]

K: Are there other events that stand out for you from your time with the group?

Paris Williams: Not particularly. Like I said, it's a LOT of water under this bridge since then.

K: Was there communication between the west coast branch and the east coast branch?

Paris Williams: I'm sure it was, but it wasn't---I felt like Cheryl and the people who were close to her, basically, were in total control of that. And so I wasn't particularly involved.

K: Do you know if they were making some effort to have some sort of continuity between the organizations as far as statements that were issued?

Paris Williams: Yeah, that was my sense. I mean, that it was all sort of one organization. Not, you know, that she was trying to do anything particularly innovative out here.

K: So did they work on the same issues then or did they have a few in common?

Paris Williams: I think the tendency was to work on really broad, national issues at the time. You know, whether it was political prisoners or national liberation in Southern African or whatever it was. Things that--- I think that the early '70s people were---people were much more focused specific issues, just in general. You had national organizations that really encompassed issues nationally.

K: Did you---do you recall doing any sort of consciousness-raising work or intergroup work or was it mostly working on specific activities?

Paris Williams: Well, I don't recall particularly sort of, like, consciousness-raising sessions, which I think may have been a later '70s development [laughter]. But that people learned by participating and by taking assignments in areas, perhaps, where they didn't know a lot and so they had to do some research and they had to work with other people who perhaps knew more than they did. You know what I'm saying? And where it was sort of germane to the process that as you work, you would learn more and you would kind of grow in terms of your own capabilities. ★

K: So it was more working collectively?

Paris Williams: That was sort of, I think, a buzz word actually.

K: Do you---how do you think the Third World Women's Alliance was viewed by other organizations at the time?

Paris Williams: Well, I really couldn't say except for how they were viewed by the Communist Party because that was my other affiliation. And there was definitely tension. There was definitely tension which is what eventually led to my completely sort of dropping the idea of being a part of the Third World Women's Alliance.

K: What was that tension?

Paris Williams: Well, I think it was on both sides, in retrospect. The tension, I think, as far as the Third World Women's Alliance was concerned was very explicit. That they thought of themselves as, what the Communists would call a "cadre organization," like a political party. Because that was something they raised with me frequently; that there was a conflict between me being a member of the Party and being a member of the Third World Women's Alliance, which I, somehow, had difficulty perceiving in the moment.

K: What did they see the conflict as?

Paris Williams: Well, because they were---my sense from them, even though I can't say I actually ever truly understood ---this is, is that both organizations were cadre organizations and that they would have conflicting points of view. And that, in that sense, I would be unable to resolve, you know, potentially that conflict by being in both organizations. Now, I don't really have a clue how a women's organization, first of all, can consider itself a cadre organization. Can you hold one minute? [she had another call]

Paris Williams: Go 'head. Or what was I saying?

K: You were talking about how a women's organization could consider themselves a care organization.

Paris Williams: Well, I just never could quite figure it, so I can't give you their rationale.

K: Well, how would you define a cadre organization?

Paris Williams: A cadre organization, basically, is a political party that just does sort of get to the point, a party line. You know, and specific guidelines for membership in terms of making a commitment to a specific party platform. And, personally, I never saw a conflict between Party membership and being in the Third World Women's Alliance, but they did.

K: The Third World Women's Alliance?

Paris Williams: Right, they did. Although no one ever articulated it to me in such a way that I can say I understood what it was.

K: And then did the Communist Party have a problem with you being in the Third World Women's Alliance?

Paris Williams: No. Except I remember people discussing it, like, "Well, they think they're a cadre organization," and everybody going, "How? Why? What?" You know, "How is that possible?" How do you have a a unisex cadre organization? It just didn't work. I mean, it was conceptually difficult. That was sort of where we stopped. You have a political party. If you're going to be effective, how can you have one with only women. *

K: I see.

Paris Williams: I mean, it wasn't a put down, it was just a practical consideration.

K: Right, about definitions.

Paris Williams: Yeah, I mean, and basically, the only other conclusion you could draw is that they were anti-Communist Party and thus, didn't want Party members in their organization. That's the only other way they could do, but the Third World Women's Alliance never said that.

K: So was there any sort of red-baiting that happened?

Paris Williams: I guess yes and no. I mean, nobody was ever explicit about it, but they simply insisted that there was a contradiction.

K: That's interesting considering that it was a socialist organization.

Paris Williams: Oh, that was not at all uncommon at the time.

Paris Williams: And, in fact, many of the same people who were in the Third World Women's Alliance were also, I think, a little bit later—a few years later—really were part of the leadership here in Northern California of the Vencemos Brigade [more info]. And we confronted those same issues over and over again. And I think really it was—I'm speculating, I don't know—but I think it was this whole thing about China versus the Soviet Union. You know, Mao versus Lenin or whatever. I don't know. I know they were much more explicitly Maoist in the Brigade than they were in the Third World Women's Alliance. And that had in itself many internal contradictions because they were basically representing a state, a nation-state, Cuba, that was powerfully allied with the Soviet Union. So, I mean, contradictions notwithstanding, we just lived with 'em back then. It was, like, whatever. But at the same time there were problems and resentments and all sorts of thing. I mean, I had to apply to Cuba five or six times before I actually went and a lot of it was just bullshit. They just weren't letting any communists in.

K: They weren't letting any *American* communists in?

Paris Williams: Right. CP-USA. And there were other issues. I mean, the fact that Brigade was mostly student and mainly middle class. Those were the only people at the time, I mean, most people who work couldn't go away for a month or two months. You know what I'm saying? I mean, if you had a family it was very difficult. And if you look at the history as it progressed, the Brigades got shorter and shorter as more working people were able to go. They were down to what? Two weeks. 'Cause that's the time that most working people had to go, but by then the leadership had changed entirely.

K: So do you—see you could get me off on a whole 'nother subject---

Paris Williams: Yeah, let's get back. I didn't want to sort of go there too far, but in a way the two are very much related.

K: So with the Third World Women's Alliance do you recall any coalition work that the organization did? Or any allies they had?

Paris Williams: Actually, I remember one [laughter]. This has gonna be the most contradictory interview you'll probably have, but I actually do remember---Angela's out of jail. I think she was actually out on bail at the time and there was a mass demonstration called in San Jose, where, of course, she was on trial in support of her and other political prisoners. And for whatever reason---I really don't know because at the time I was long gone from the Third World Women's Alliance---they contacted me and asked me if I would represent their organization in this coalition [laughter]. Which I did. Which I agreed to. Like I said, we just lived with the contradictions and I have no idea why they called me, but as always I thought there is no---I mean, if you are fighting or struggling around women's issues, women of color issues, for me there was never a contradiction. So when they asked me to represent them, I did and I did my best and they seemed pleased with the job that I did although it had its very harrowing moments.

K: Do you recall--- well, what were some of those "harrowing moments"?

Paris Williams: Well, it was an interesting scenario. Because it was a coalition you had a very wide range of participants. Some far more radical than others. One organization was actually a lesbian organization, I think, but it was very radical feminist in any case and I think their constituency was primarily very young women who were lesbian. And they were, like, so ultra---their slogan, I think, was "End Prick Power!" or something. It was just like, "Gimme a break!"

K: Do you recall which organization that was?

Paris Williams: I don't remember the name of the organization. I doubt it had much of a long life. And they created this very serious problem in the coalition because, basically, they alienated everybody, but they were---people were trying to really make an effort to be as inclusive as possible. I guess that's the only way to say it. And so we had these horrifying meetings one after the other of people screaming and yelling at each other about prick power and male supremacy and the oppression of women and on and on and on and people trying to find some middle ground, which was virtually impossible in any ideological sense. In terms of how the demonstration---the coalition in the demonstration wanted to represent itself as a coalition. And finally, what happened is interesting---was sort of a structural compromise. You know, "We will not include any of your ideas in our coalition's platform, but we will list you as part of the coalition and you can carry signs saying whatever you like." And what was interesting about it was---it was like, what I've told you already is kind of like not really a description very positive of scenario. On the other hand, while we were having these horrible meetings a lot of things actually were getting worked out. If not between this group of radical feminists and the rest of the group, but within the group itself---the rest of the group. People were being able to articulate their ideas and their limits and their boundaries and their questions and all this stuff. So it was, in a sense, a productive arena of struggle. And the proposal, that people finally accepted out of exhaustion, short circuited that process where you just say, "Fuck it. I'm compromising. I don't care."

K: So sort of "forced consensus" maybe?

Paris Williams: Exactly. Where you just are too exhausted to go any further. And it was a man who actually made that proposal and a man who was a member of the Communist Party, which totally pissed me off. And that's probably why I remember it. It was, like, you know, getting the ten women in this organization to participate in this coalition is not the point of all these horrifying meetings. The point was for, on the positive side, that we were at the point of actually building a consensus in the rest of the coalition. Am I making any sense?

K: Yeah, yeah. It does. So what did---okay.

Paris Williams: So, basically, he pulled the rug out from under that.

K: So it wasn't really about being inclusive.

Paris Williams: It was just about saying, "I'm tired. Let's just find a solution and go with it." Even if it's not something we really would prefer to live with. It's compromises for the sake of compromise. There was no real value in it.

K: Right. For the sake of getting the demonstration done. It was very task-oriented than to the process.

Paris Williams: Exactly, exactly. And so that was actually the last time---pretty much my last contact with the Third World Women's Alliance. I mean, I have no idea what---they, of course, continued to exist, but I thought, "I'm done." [laughter] So I didn't really have that many *really* good experiences with the organization.

K: So that was probably 1972?

Paris Williams: Oh god, I don't know. Let's see they just had the 25th Anniversary celebration of Angela being acquitted. That would be '96, 1976, so '71 she was acquitted, so maybe this was 1970.

K: And that was when you left for good.

Paris Williams: Yeah, 'cause she was out on bail. I'm pretty sure she was just out on bail. The minute she was acquitted she was out of the country. If she was hanging around San Jose, she was out on bail.

K: Waiting for Reagan to do something else.

Paris Williams: Right.

K: Were you aware of any black women's organizations that were active around that same time period?

Paris Williams: Well, let me think. Not *per se* black women's organizations.

K: Had you---were you familiar with the National Black Feminist Organization?

Paris Williams: No.

K: Or Combahee River Collective?

Paris Williams: No.

K: Black Women Organized for Action?

Paris Williams: There's an organization Black Women Organized for Political Action. I don't know if that's the same.

K: I think they have connections.

Paris Williams: Okay, 'cause they're very much geared toward legislative stuff. You know, electing certain people to office and so on. And that was never a major interest of mine. Although I'm sure I've been in coalitions with them from time to time.

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K: So for the time that you were in Third World Women's Alliance---what do you think the organization accomplished? Did you get anything out of your time spent with them?

Paris Williams: A world of frustration, mostly. But a lot of it was my own personal circumstances and, of course, my association and allegiance to the Communist Party had a lot to do with it. I mean, because I was open about it and it was problematic.

K: For them.

Paris Williams: More for them than for me. I just was doing the stuff that I felt like, you know, needed to be done. And, you know, I was a Marxist so why shouldn't I be in the Communist Party? I was sort of on a linear way of approaching it. I mean, I didn't stay that way, but I did for a while.

K: Why do you think---if you could speculate about why the organization doesn't exist anymore.

Paris Williams: Well, I think their pretensions of being a cadre organization probably had something to do with it because to be a cadre organization you have to take on a broader focus, first of all, than women's issues. And I think ultimately women would know that. And then there was also a lot of complexity in terms of dealing as women of color coming to grips with---you know, it's so easy to say "women of color," but there are some very fundamental differences among women of color. Not that we don't have also a powerful basis for unity, but you can't sort of gloss over those differences in a way that people still tend to do by using words like "multiculturalism". It doesn't speak to the sort of specificity of people's historical experiences in this country and prior to arriving in this country. I mean, as an African American woman I'm still in the process of sorting out who I am or who we are [laughter].

* decline.

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K: It's a life-long process.

Paris Williams: And working out issues of difference as well as commonality. That's actually become more important to me over the years. I think there's---what's that expression? "The Devil's in the details"? That's also where all the information is. That, you know, glossing over difference and generalizing difference is not that productive because the differences emerge and then what are you gonna do?

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K: Right. Whether you want 'em to or not.

Paris Williams: Right. Then what do you do?

K: So, do you know the current whereabouts of any other members of that organization or were there people who were in the Communist Party with you who also left that organization?

Paris Williams: Oh, gosh. Most of the people that actually got booted out with me---well, I do know one other person now that I think of it. And also Cheryl is still living here in Oakland.

K: Do you remember her last name?

Paris Williams: No, but I could probably find out. And also Melanie is still around and I know she is a pediatrician and I know people with kids who use her for their doctor. I could probably sort of run down how to get in contact with her.

K: Okay. Are they both in Oakland?

Paris Williams: Yeah. And I know Cheryl still works for the Port [Authority?]. And the other person, I actually have a name and a phone number I can give you. Her name is Gloria Toolsie and her phone number is area code 510. 261.5295. And you can say I gave you the number. And I can run down Melanie and Cheryl and I can either drop you a line or more than likely pick up the phone.

[Chatter about computers.]

K: I had one more question which was if you had any Third World Women's Alliance papers or documentation or articles?

Paris Williams: I doubt that seriously, but I tell you, the person who might would be Cheryl 'cause she was really the leader of this group.

[Asks about dissertation and then...]

Paris Williams: Okay and in their thesis would I get mentioned ^{by} my name or---

K: Well, that's on the informed consent sheet. You can either check yes or no, if you want your name mentioned in publications. I can do it either way.

Paris Williams: I don't know I might leave my name out of that particular story. I just feel like it was such a little disaster in a way or recurring disaster for me.

K: Well, anonymous or not it's valuable information.

Paris Williams: Well, good. I'm glad 'cause after I talked to you yesterday I thought---I started thinking about my experiences, I thought, "Well, this isn't gonna be no fairy story."

K: Well, I hope I didn't bring up any bad memories for you.

Paris Williams: Oh, no. Not really. It was all interesting. It was all a learning process.

[Discussion of her work in grad school as a historical archeologist.]